



Two Ontological Orientations in Sociology: Building Social Ontologies and Blurring the Boundaries of the ‘Social’

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Nedim Karakayali

Bilkent University, Turkey

Abstract

The article highlights two contrasting ways in which social theorists have been trying to define the ontological boundaries of sociology since the early days of the discipline. Some (e.g. Durkheim, Weber, and critical realists) have attempted to demarcate social reality as a causally autonomous and qualitatively distinct realm in a segmented/stratified universe. Others (e.g. Tarde, Spencer, Luhmann, sociobiologists, and actor-network theorists) have postulated a more open (or flat) ontological space and blurred such demarcations by either rejecting the causal autonomy of sociological phenomena, or their qualitative distinctiveness, or both. So far, there has been little convergence between these two orientations since according to the former, the opening of the boundaries is likely to give way to reductionist conceptions of society, whereas the latter tends to associate rigid boundaries with essentialism. Through a close examination of these opposing orientations, the article aims to shed light on current ontological dilemmas of sociology.

Keywords

actor-network theory, critical realism, evolutionary theory, history of sociology, ontology, social ontology, systems theory

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a veritable growth in ontological inquiries in sociology – so much so that some scholars now talk about an ‘ontological turn’ in social theory (Latsis et al., 2007). Carried out mostly, though not exclusively, by scholars associated with critical realism (e.g. Archer et al., 1998; Lawson et al., 2007), such inquiries involve diverse arguments about whether society is essentially chaotic or structured, subjective

Corresponding author:

Nedim Karakayali, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Bilkent University, Bilkent, Ankara 06800, Turkey.

Email: nedim@bilkent.edu.tr

or objective, and so on. Ultimately, these studies often have as their central concern to establish a 'social ontology' – that is, a theory which mainly purports to describe *the nature of social reality per se*. As such, this 'turn' presupposes a predominantly *inward ontological orientation*, 'motivated by concerns that are generated *within* the social sciences' (Latsis et al., 2007: 6, emphasis in original).

In the same period, however, there has also been another ontologically significant development in sociology, even if this is not usually described as a 'turn'. Namely, sociologists from very different perspectives – ranging from sociobiology to actor-network theory – have begun to show interest in entities that remain beyond the traditional ontological boundaries of the discipline, such as technological artefacts, neural networks, genes, microbes, and so on. One salient feature of these recent contributions is that they offer new conceptualizations about the relations between sociological and 'other' types of phenomena. At stake in these new conceptualizations, therefore, is *not so much the 'inner' nature of social reality but rather its 'outer' limits*. As such, this latter type of inquiries might perhaps be characterized as a second 'turn', which assumes a more *outward ontological orientation* than the first one.

That in contemporary sociology it is possible to identify two ontological orientations constitutes our starting point. But there is more to the story. To begin with, it is crucial to note that the concept of *social* ontology, which constitutes the main focus of the first orientation, only makes sense, if one presupposes that the 'social' has rather clear-cut boundaries. But the moment one questions the existence of such boundaries and posits various relations or commonalities between different ontological domains (which is precisely what the second ontological orientation is about), the very notion of the *social* begins to become problematic (Candea, 2012; Joyce, 2002). In this sense, there is also a significant *opposition* between these two orientations. Moreover, and equally importantly, much indicates that *this opposition is not unique to contemporary literature*. As we shall see, these contrasting tendencies have persisted, albeit in different forms, throughout the history of sociology.

So far, this persistent opposition has not been an object of sustained analysis. Yet, as I will try to show in this article, such an analysis might constitute a fruitful starting point for exploring two different kinds of ontological universes envisioned by social theorists. More generally, since each universe implies different possibilities, problems and limits for sociological inquiry, this analysis can also contribute to our understanding of the 'state of the discipline', at least as far as its ontological dilemmas and tensions are concerned.

This is, then, essentially a diagnostic paper. My primary aim is to reveal the main characteristics of the two orientations, rather than to overcome, in one way or another, the opposition between them. This descriptive approach is fully intentional. In fact, what I ultimately wish to underline in this article is that the question of *how to interpret and deal with this persistent opposition itself has a profound ontological significance for sociology*. For, sooner or later, in trying to tackle this question we arrive at a major dilemma: should we see this persistent opposition as a failure of social theorists to come up with a 'synthesis', or should we consider it as a trademark of sociology as a discipline, the uniqueness of which lies in constantly questioning and reconstructing its objects of inquiry? I will return to this important point in the conclusion.

The Conceptual Framework of Analysis

Theories that adopt a similar ontological orientation often differ immensely in other (e.g. methodological) respects. Revealing the contrasting ontological tendencies in the literature, therefore, requires a dedicated analysis which looks beyond these differences (and which often results in the grouping together of theories that are usually viewed as belonging to very different traditions). In undertaking such an analysis, I shall focus on two fundamental issues: namely, the *qualitative* and *causal* peculiarities of sociological phenomena. More precisely, I shall delineate the two ontological orientations in terms of the divergent answers they give to two basic questions:

1. The first question revolves around the issue of whether one sees *an unsurpassable qualitative difference* between sociological and other phenomena – or, conversely, whether one posits *a basic quality (an element or process) that is common to all*.
2. The second question is *whether one attributes sociological phenomena causal autonomy* – or, conversely, *whether one posits causal relationships between sociological and ‘other’ kinds of phenomena*.

Where do these questions come from and what is their importance? Let me begin by noting that I did not simply devise them from scratch with the aim of imposing them upon the theories I analyse as a mere logical scheme. Rather, these questions are *immanent* to the texts considered here. Not only have they been raised in European philosophy at least since the 17th century in the analysis of the relationships between the ontological domains of society, nature and the individual self (see, for example: Seigel, 2005) but, as we shall see, they have also been taken up by social theorists repeatedly since the 19th century. This is not so surprising since sociology was born in an academic landscape which was already occupied by other disciplines – especially the natural sciences – and, therefore, its practitioners, all from the beginning, were faced with the problem of determining the differences and similarities, and autonomy or interrelatedness of phenomena that can be delineated as ‘sociological’ with respect to others.

But the ultimate importance of these questions for our purposes here lies in the four distinct ways they can be – and, historically, have indeed been – answered, which attribute to sociological phenomena:

- A) both qualitative distinctiveness and causal autonomy;
- B) only qualitative distinctiveness but not causal autonomy;
- C) causal autonomy but not qualitative distinctiveness; and
- D) neither.

Since these answers specify the *distinctiveness* and *autonomy* of sociological phenomena *in relation to others*, in effect, they can be seen as different ways of conceiving the *ontological boundaries of sociology*. To clarify further, of these four basic answers, it is mainly the first – ‘sociological phenomena are qualitatively distinct and causally autonomous’ – which serves as a basis for the notion of *social ontology*. As we shall see, it is

Table 1. An overview of the main conceptual distinctions and exemplary theories used in the article.

	Qualitative distinctiveness	Causal autonomy	Exemplary theories
Ontological orientation I (Building social ontologies)	+	+	Social ontologies of: Durkheim Weber Critical realists
Ontological orientation II (Blurring the boundaries of the ‘social’)	+	–	Evolutionary approaches
	–	+	Luhmann’s social systems theory
	–	–	ANT

indeed on the basis of this presupposition that contributors to the first ontological orientation (e.g. Durkheim, Weber, and critical realists) have been trying to establish highly divergent social ontologies. All the remaining three answers, however, imply an ‘opening’ in the ontological boundaries of sociology, either by denying causal autonomy, or qualitative distinctiveness, or both. I shall suggest that these three answers (B, C, and D) can best be exemplified by certain evolutionary approaches, Luhmann’s system theory, and actor-network theory, respectively.

The two questions and the associated four answers, then, can be seen as the basic elements of a ‘typology’, by which I aim to bring some clarity to the existing ontological orientations in the literature (see Table 1 for an overview). I primarily focus on the above-mentioned theories because their propositions constitute the closest approximations of the four answers. It is important to note in this context that not all theoretical approaches in the literature subscribe to a single answer. Thus, many notable theoretical traditions are excluded from my discussion because they can accommodate multiple ontological orientations.¹

In what follows, I shall follow the basic scheme outlined above, starting with the first answer (A) and the first ontological orientation. I shall then turn to the other three answers (B, C, and D), which constitute the main currents of the second orientation and which stand in a more or less tense relation to the first.

The First Ontological Orientation: Building Social Ontologies

The idea that ‘sociological phenomena have distinct qualities and causal autonomy’ has a long history. Indeed, its two ‘classic’ versions can be traced back to the works of Durkheim and Weber. I shall begin with a brief discussion of these works since they give us important clues about a much broader inclination in the history of social theory.

As is well-known, Durkheim saw no essential methodological differences between natural and social sciences, encouraging sociologists to borrow concepts from other disciplines. This *methodological* congruity, however, did not entail *ontological identity*. Thus, he also emphasized that such borrowed concepts were bound to ‘appear in sociology under entirely new aspects’ (Durkheim, 1938: 142). More generally, for Durkheim (1938: 1), ‘there is in every society a certain group of phenomena which may be differentiated from those studied by the other natural sciences’ – namely, *social facts*. Social facts do not just constitute ‘a category of facts with very distinctive characteristics’, but they are also *causally autonomous*: ‘a social fact can be explained only by another social fact’ (Durkheim, 1938: 145).

In heralding the qualitative and causal *irreducibility* of sociological phenomena, Durkheim’s sociology is quite paradigmatic. But it is certainly not the only one. Despite enormous differences in other respects,² Weber’s ontological premises have a number of profound similarities with Durkheim’s. To begin with, Weber (1949: 77–81) proposes a fundamental qualitative distinction between generalizable, meaningless impulse–response chains that belong to the order of natural phenomena and ‘human actions’ that are driven by culturally significant meanings and values; ‘culture’, for him, is a unique ‘segment’ in the overall ‘meaningless infinity of the world process’. Moreover, on the basis of this distinction, Weber also draws a sharp line between causal explanations in natural and social sciences, where the latter primarily deal with the question of how meaningful actions interact with other meaningful actions: ‘without reference to meaning’, such actions or their products (e.g. artefacts) remain ‘wholly unintelligible’ (Weber, 1964: 88–94).

Now, one crucial point for my analysis here is that, although Durkheim and Weber propose radically *different social ontologies*, they *converge* in drawing rather clear-cut *boundaries for social reality*. This implies that *it is possible to attribute very different qualities and causal mechanisms to sociological phenomena, while subscribing to the idea that such phenomena occupy a unique place in a neatly divided ontological universe*. This is, indeed, a long-lasting inclination in the history of social theory, which goes far beyond Durkheim and Weber.

To begin with, many of Durkheim’s and Weber’s predecessors – and contemporaries – were already advocating social ontologies similar to theirs. For example, as is well-known, Comte (1875) anticipated much of the ‘holistic’ perspective of Durkheim, stressing the impossibility of ‘decomposing’ society into more elementary parts. Similarly, social ontologies centring around the notions of ‘meaning’ and ‘values’ were already prevalent in the works of many 19th century neo-Kantian philosophers – most notably, Rickert – to whom Weber (1949: 50) often acknowledged his debt (see, especially: Rose, 1981).

But the inclination to demarcate the ontological domain of sociology with clear boundaries is not peculiar to the classical era. It persists also in more recent theoretical approaches that propose considerably different social ontologies than Durkheim and Weber (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1973). Most notably, these assumptions are also central to the theoretical tradition that has contributed extensively to the current ontological inquiries in sociology; namely, *critical realism*.

As is well-known, of particular interest to sociologists with a critical realist affiliation is Bhaskar’s conceptualization of society as an *emergent reality*. For Bhaskar (1989: 45), the ‘activity-, concept-, and space-time-dependence of social structures’ sets ‘major

ontological limits' on the possibility of approaching societies with a naturalistic ontology. Thus, Bhaskar insists on differentiating the subject matter of social sciences from that of natural sciences. More specifically, both qualitative distinctiveness and causal autonomy are integral to the key concepts in this literature: *stratification, emergence and morphogenesis* (Archer, 1995, 2003; Bhaskar, 1989). Whatever its underlying *strata* might be, social reality *emerges* as a qualitatively distinct realm with its peculiar formative and transformative dynamics.

On the basis of these general principles, critical realists often attempt to go beyond objectivist and subjectivist social ontologies. One important example is Archer (2003), who brings to focus the phenomenon of 'internal conversation' as the 'mediating process' between structure and agency. It is through these internal dialogues that individual agents contemplate on structural forces in their environment and attempt to give a shape to their existence. However fallible these attempts might be, it is above all this capacity of human actors that gives social reality an *irreducible* character, while also making it inherently transformable. And, although Archer (2003) opposes the idea that this reflexive capacity is an exclusively social product, this does not lead her to propose a causal link between, say, biologic and social processes. Archer's (1995) theory is ultimately a *social ontology: there is such a thing as social reality*, which is unlike any other reality, *even if it does not have an immutable form*.

In concluding this section, it is worth acknowledging that my attempt to group together such diverse theories in the same category might seem rather controversial. After all, in the existing literature, Durkheim, Weber and critical realists are hardly ever considered to share a similar ontological perspective. Yet, the above analysis indicates that they converge in at least three important respects. First, they all draw various boundaries around social reality and fill this space with different social ontologies. Secondly, in doing so, they envision a *highly segmented and/or stratified ontological universe* – where, in one distinctive region, social reality shines forth with all its uniqueness, calling for the undivided attention of sociologists. And, thirdly, operating in such a divided universe, they are all concerned about 'protecting' the boundaries of social reality from 'external' intrusions that can give way to *reductionist conceptions* of that reality.

To qualify this last point further, however, it is worth noting that the divisions drawn by the above theorists have never been absolute. Thus, for example, Durkheim (2001) suggests that the striking cross-cultural diversity in the conceptions of the sacred and the profane might owe its existence to the unique bio-psychic characteristics of human species (Hammond, 1983). Similarly, Weber (1964: 94) recognizes that certain 'meaningless' (e.g. natural or bio-psychic) factors might also influence human actions and can be taken into account as 'data'. A much more refined version of this idea can be found in Bhaskar's theory of emergence, which maintains that specific 'causal powers' – e.g. causal mechanisms peculiar to society – emerge at specific 'levels' of reality and, therefore, require a dedicated analysis at that level. As Elder-Vass (2007: 170) points out, however, when it comes to *actual events*, the theory of emergence also implies that such specific causal powers 'are combined with a multiplicity of causal mechanisms from other levels of the ontological strata'. Thus, Bhaskar's theory recognizes 'the *inherent* inter-relatedness of the different [ontological] levels' (Elder-Vass, 2007: 170, emphasis in original).

The crucial point is that, this 'interrelatedness' is largely overshadowed in the works of Bhaskar and other contributors to the first orientation by the emphasis put – often in

fear of opening the doors to *reductionism* – on the *sui generis* nature of social reality. As we shall now see, this interrelatedness plays a far more prominent role in the second ontological orientation.

The Second Ontological Orientation: Blurring the Boundaries of the ‘Social’

The prevalence of an inclination to draw thick boundaries around social reality in the works of Durkheim and Weber was perhaps not so surprising. After all, both were trying to carve out a distinct ontological domain for their then vaguely recognized enterprise. This, however, does not mean that in its formative years sociology was ontologically more monistic than today. Many other theorists writing in this era too were in search of an ontological ground for sociology, but they did not follow the same route. Let me briefly highlight some of these earlier attempts, which anticipate, at least in certain important respects, the more current versions of the second ontological orientation I shall discuss in a moment.

To begin with, Tarde’s (1899) opposition to Durkheim’s social ontology is well-known (Candea, 2012). But Tarde was not simply offering an alternative *social* ontology. Rather, he was trying to conceptualize social processes as specific instants of universal processes that applied to all phenomena in the universe (such as ‘repetition’ and ‘opposition’). In this sense, as Deleuze (1994: 313–4) puts it, his sociology was based on a *cosmological rather than a social ontology* (I shall return to Tarde later). A similar notion is also central to Simmel (2009: 27), who maintains that the alleged reality denoted by ‘the general concept [of] society’ is only ‘an apparently independent historical reality’. Like Tarde, even in his sociological works preceding his ‘life-philosophy’, he views ‘social life’ as a continuation of elementary ‘life processes’ in general (see, especially: Simmel, 2009: 229). Just as Tarde’s arguments irritated Durkheim, this tendency in Simmel’s work bothered Weber (1972) considerably, even if he also acknowledged Simmel’s (1977) work on ‘historical forms’ as a major source of inspiration for his interpretive sociology (Weber, 1975). A similarly ambivalent relation exists also between Weber and Dilthey. Like Weber, Dilthey (1991) insisted on distinguishing human sciences from natural sciences, emphasizing the mental/spiritual content of the former, which he characterized as *Geisteswissenschaften*. At the same time, however, like Simmel, especially in his earlier work, Dilthey suggested that intellectual and cultural systems can be conceived as the crystallizations of more elementary forms of life.

Finally, to this list we can also add what McKinnon (2010) has called Spencer’s ‘energetic sociology’, which draws links between inorganic, organic, and social processes. Spencer (1900: 367) does indeed conceive evolution as a ‘cosmic process’, which involves ‘an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion; during which the matter passes from a relatively indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a relatively definite, coherent heterogeneity’ (cited in Offer, 2010a: 308). Spencer’s theory, as Offer (2010a) stresses, is not simply Darwinian but rather based on ‘a pre-Darwinian providential or quasi-deistic conception’ and, as such, is substantially different than the ‘selectionist paradigm’ that underlies the contemporary evolutionary approaches that I will discuss below. Nevertheless, he too proceeds with a ‘cosmic’ ontology, which considerably blurs the boundaries of sociological phenomena.³

Although in highly modified forms, especially in the latter half of the 20th century ontological orientations akin to those of Tarde, Simmel, and Spencer have gained growingly more recognition. In what follows, I shall highlight three main currents in this literature. Before proceeding further, however, I should note that, like the diverse approaches comprising the first ontological orientation, the three theories I shall discuss below – evolutionary approaches, Luhmann's system theory and actor-network theory – are not usually considered as belonging to a similar tradition. Yet, again, they concur in several important respects: they all blur, in one way or another, the boundaries of the 'social'; they all postulate a *more or less open ontological universe*; and, indeed, they often see in the attempts for segmenting this space with rigid borderlines an 'essentializing' tendency. But they do all this on the basis of quite different assumptions. Let me begin with the first one.

Sociological Phenomena Have Distinct Qualities but Not Causal Autonomy

The most vivid example of this assumption can be observed in some versions of what might loosely be called 'evolutionary' approaches in the social sciences, which emerged in the post-1970s.⁴ The main idea here is characterized by Runciman (1998) as the 'selectionist paradigm', which implies that selective processes 'analogous but not reducible' to those in nature are at work in socio-cultural reality (see also: Offer, 2010a).⁵ Thus, for example, culture and genes are often viewed as constituting two *distinct* information systems shaping human behaviour. More specifically, most contributors to this literature (Boyd and Richerson, 1985; Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman, 1981; Durham, 1991) tend to agree on one basic point: although both cultural norms (or practices) and genes are prone to structurally similar processes (variation, transmission, and selection), they have entirely different contents (e.g. ideas and molecular structures) and mechanisms (e.g. imitation/learning and biologic reproduction). Culture and genes (or, socio-cultural and natural selection), therefore, constitute qualitatively distinct phenomena – so much so that, for some proponents of this approach, 'the existence of culture causes human evolution to be fundamentally different than that of noncultural organisms' (Boyd and Richerson, 1985: 99).

At the same time, central to these theories is the idea that, despite this qualitative chasm, socio-cultural and biological processes can mutually exert selective pressures on each other and, thereby, somehow *causally interact* with each other. There are, however, diverse ways in which this 'causal interaction' is specified, especially because contributors to this literature have divergent views about to what extent cultural norms/practices can be at odds with natural selection. Thus, while some approaches view culture as a kind of auxiliary mechanism for selecting and retaining biologically adaptive human practices, others emphasize that many maladaptive – or, below optimum – practices from a biological point of view can be culturally selected and nurtured (Boyd and Richerson, 1985). And, yet some others opt for a multi-mode conceptualization (Durham, 1991). Finally, not all evolutionary approaches extend their analysis of causal links to genes, as is the case with some sociobiological theories drawing on evolutionary psychology (Tooby and Cosmides, 1989). Similarly, TenHouten's (2005) 'neurosociology' attempts to draw causal links between social structures, cultural conceptions, and neural structures, leaving aside genotypic variation.

Evolutionary approaches, then, do not so much propose a new social ontology. Rather, by causally *linking* sociological processes with biologic or neural processes in one way or another, they open a 'hole' in the boundaries of the 'social', and thereby render, even if partially, the very concept of *social* ontology problematic. As such, they stand in a tense relationship with those approaches that assume that sociological phenomena can only be rendered intelligible through the identification of those causes that are intrinsic to socio-cultural reality. In fact, for many theorists adopting an evolutionary perspective, such an assumption implies an *essentialist and parochial attitude*, which ignores not only the interactions between social and natural processes but also the recent findings especially in the life sciences (e.g. Durham, 1991; TenHouten, 2005; Van den Berghe, 1990).

Causal Autonomy but Not Entirely Distinctive Qualities

In almost diametric opposition to the previous approach, some contemporary theories insist on the causal autonomy of sociological phenomena but largely deny that there is a *fundamental* qualitative difference which differentiates these phenomena from others. Luhmann's systems theory constitutes the most vivid example of such an ontological perspective.⁶ According to this theory, living bodies, minds, and societies all share the *common quality* of being 'self-referential systems'. Yet – or rather because of this – they remain 'operationally closed' to each other and retain their causal autonomy.

The origins of modern systems theory can be traced back to holism as a meta-theoretical approach, which basically suggests that the existence/function of parts would remain unintelligible without taking into consideration the whole in which they are embedded. One of the trademarks of 'traditional' holism has been the conceptualization of the 'whole' as a self-organizing 'close system'. Especially in the second half of the 20th century, however, this idea has been the target of severe criticisms, eventually giving way to the theory of 'open systems'. As Von Bertalanffy (1969) underlines in his pioneering work, in this new version of systems theory, a system is not isolated from its environment in any absolute sense but it nevertheless manages to generate and sustain a different organization of reality within its boundaries (see also: Bateson, 1999; Maturana and Varela, 1980).

Luhmann (1995) embraces the idea of open systems fully, viewing the earlier holistic approaches in sociology, as well as those that privilege 'human agency', as archaic forms of *essentialism* that can be overcome in light of the recent findings in, among others, information science and cybernetics. According to him, in this respect, the most radical novelty in contemporary systems theory is brought about by the theory of self-referential systems, which provides a unique answer to the question of how a system can remain open to its environment and yet differentiate itself from it:

The theory of self-referential systems maintains that ... systems refer to themselves (be this to elements of the same system, to operations of the same system, or to the unity of the same system) in constituting their elements and their elemental relations. (Luhmann, 1995: 9; 1990)

In this sense, a self-referential system does not first exist and then refer to itself, but rather it is by referring to itself that it gains a distinct existence; as such, it does not really

'react' to its environment but only to its internal milieu. Self-referential systems, therefore, constitute a paradigmatic model for causal autonomy: 'only [they] create for themselves the possibility of ordering causalities by distribution over system and environment' (Luhmann, 1995: 10). This principle also applies to social systems as self-referential communicative systems.

Luhmann's theory, then, blurs the boundaries of the social in a very different direction than the evolutionary approaches; namely, by postulating not a causal link but a fundamental *qualitative commonality* between organisms, minds, and societies.⁷ This commonality is not that of a common substance or essence. Rather, if there is an 'ontology' in Luhmann (2006), it is an *ontology of difference*: what is common to organisms, minds, and societies is their propensity to develop their identity through differing. It is in this sense that Luhmann (1995) presents his theory of society as a contribution to *general* systems theory. As such, here, we see another dimension of the tension between the first and second orientations: *social ontology becomes subsumed under a more general ontology*, perhaps somewhat similar to the earlier attempts to conceptualize social processes within a broader 'vital' or 'cosmological' ontology.

Sociological Phenomena Have Neither Distinct Qualities nor Causal Autonomy

Any reductionist theory that conceives 'society' as a product of some 'non-social' process would naturally also claim that sociological phenomena have neither distinct qualities, nor causal autonomy. Actor-network theory (hereafter ANT) too views 'society' as a surface effect of something else – i.e., heterogeneous networks – but with an important twist. These heterogeneous networks are posited as the authentic 'subject matter' of sociological inquiry. As John Law (1992: 380) puts it: 'the metaphor⁸ of *heterogeneous network* ... lies at the heart of actor-network theory, and is a way of suggesting that society, organizations, agents and machines are all *effects* generated in patterned networks of diverse (not simply human) materials' (emphasis in original).

Perhaps the best way to start our discussion on ANT is to compare it with the Weberian and Durkheimian social ontologies considered above, which as we have seen, assert the distinctiveness of sociological phenomena in two ways: either by emphasizing the differences between cultural and natural phenomena, or by emphasizing the objective, independent existence of social facts. ANT attempts to refute both schemes as well as the various later attempts to 'synthesize' them (e.g. Bourdieu, 1990), detecting in most of them an 'essentializing' tendency. In fact, none of the concepts that have been taken as an 'essential' ontological starting point in social theory so far is deemed to be sufficient to do the job: '[n]ot action, nor the actor, nor interaction, nor the individual, nor the symbol, nor the system, nor society, nor their numerous combinations' (Latour, 1996: 238).

ANT's opposition to those theories that defend the distinctiveness of sociological phenomena on the basis of a distinction between conscious human actors and non-human entities follows two routes. First, some actor-network theorists point out that if there is indeed anything that makes 'human societies' different from other animal societies, it is the fact that they are *not only* composed of human beings; sociology cannot go too far without the inclusion of 'objects' in its ontological domain (Latour, 1996). And, secondly,

actor-network theorists refuse to posit an exclusive link between action and conscious subjects, attributing a much broader sense to 'action'. When, say, a basketball player throws the ball to the basket, or when a political activist initiates a social movement, their 'actions' take place only in specific 'nodes' and are accompanied by the 'actions' of a whole set of other heterogeneous actors that influence the course of events: 'Action is not done under the full control of consciousness; actions should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies' (Latour, 2005: 44).

In opposition to the second major way of attributing a causal and qualitative uniqueness to sociological phenomena (by emphasizing the *sui generis* reality of *social facts*), ANT stresses that these theories fail to give an account of the emergence, stabilization and dissemination of such facts and instead take them for granted. This objection was first raised by Tarde (1899: 46), who opposed Durkheimians by noting that 'in thus postulating a collective force, which implies the conformity of millions of men acting together, they overlook ... the problem of explaining how such general assimilation could ever have taken place'. Tarde's objection to positing society as an *a priori* reality is based on two interrelated arguments. First, he stresses that 'society' cannot be treated as a static reality; there is no society but only processes of 'becoming society'. And, secondly, he insists that these processes and mechanisms through which society is *produced* should be of more primary interest to sociology than the ever temporary *products* (e.g. the Durkheimian social facts). Somewhat retrospectively, ANT can be seen as building on this Tardean heritage, with a further emphasis on the role of non-human actors in the production of society.

The crucial point for our concerns here is that, for ANT, there is no being in the universe that is social (or non-social) due to some intrinsic quality (Latour, 1996: 237). This, in effect, means that there is *no essential difference* between, say, 'social facts' and other 'things'. In ANT, 'society' becomes the generic term for any kind of 'thing' – 'assembly' – that results from a process of assembling.⁹ Thus, Latour (2005: 14) affirms Tarde's statement that 'every thing is a society' and, inverting the Durkheimian proposition that 'social facts should be treated like things', he proposes 'to treat things as social facts' (Latour, 1996: 240). ANT's motto might therefore be formulated as: *there is no such thing as society, because every thing is a society*.

With ANT, therefore, we reach one of the most extreme points of the second ontological orientation, which proposes a *de-stratified* (or 'flat') *ontological universe where the boundaries of the 'social' are almost completely demolished*. In this respect, the ontological orientation of ANT forms a vivid contrast especially with that of critical realism (see: Elder-Vass, 2008). This contrast can be seen as the most current as well as, perhaps, the most 'refined' version of the opposition between the two ontological orientations I have highlighted in this article – but it is certainly not the only example.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to bring to focus some of the most salient characteristics of two ontological orientations in sociology. The first, I suggested, is the more 'inward-looking', attempts to draw rather clear borderlines around social reality in the form of various 'social ontologies', and envisions a segmented and/or stratified universe. The second, in

contrast, is more 'outward-looking'; it blurs, if not completely erases, the boundaries of social reality and de-segments the universe in which sociologists operate.

As should already be clear from my preceding discussion, however, these two contrasting pictures should be conceived as general *tendencies*, which are articulated in different forms and with variable intensity by a range of very different theoretical traditions. Moreover, as I have also underlined above, there are many grey zones here. This means that, if the opposition highlighted in the article is taken to be an absolute one, this would be an aberration. But understood in relative terms, developing a clear sense of these two opposing tendencies can shed much light on, if I might say so, a 'reality' of our discipline. For the sociological literature is indeed permeated by a whole series of questions along these opposing lines: Should we look more inward or outward? How much qualitative distinctiveness and/or causal autonomy can we attribute to sociological phenomena? Should we envision a segmented or open universe? Should we be more wary of reductionism or essentialism? And, perhaps above all, where should we draw the limits of sociological inquiry?

For a long time now, sociologists have not been able to come to an agreement about those questions. This is the most obvious diagnosis about the 'state of the discipline' that follows from my analysis. This diagnosis, however, leads us towards anything but a closure. In fact, sooner or later it makes us stumble upon another – but this time perhaps far more 'existential' – problem, with which it is worth concluding this article.

To draw the broadest contours of this problem, it is worth paying closer attention to a point that was rather implicit in my analysis above: ontological theories in sociology almost always involve various propositions about 'ourselves' (as beings existing in society or, at the very least, constituting one of its conditions of possibility). To cite a few examples from the works I discussed earlier, such propositions range from 'we are beings capable of meaningful action' to 'we are self-referential minds that are structurally coupled to self-referential communicative systems', and from 'we are beings constrained by forces beyond our control and yet capable of giving a shape to our existence through our internal conversations' to 'we are "a whole assemblage of plug-ins coming from completely different loci"' (Latour, 2005: 208) – and so on. In this sense, integral to various technical and conceptual issues addressed by contributors to different ontological orientations are divergent propositions about what we are and what we can become.¹⁰

And, it is precisely when we try to make sense of this diversity that we encounter the signs of a major dilemma. One can interpret this diversity as a failure: for if sociologists are not going to offer clear answers about those questions, who will? But one can also rejoice at the idea that, thanks to its ontological plurality, sociology provides a platform for conceiving ourselves in multiple ways. Formulated in the specific terminology of this article, this dilemma can be summarized as follows.

Seen from one angle, the absence of an agreement about the boundaries of sociological phenomena can be interpreted as a shortcoming. After all, would sociology not turn into a more respectful, self-confident and productive discipline, if it could establish its ontological boundaries more precisely? One might, therefore, come to the conclusion that it is an urgent task for sociologists to overcome this absence by developing more 'agreeable' answers to the questions cited above. Looking at the issue from a very different angle, however, one might doubt whether it would be such a 'good thing' to have perfect answers to those questions. Do we, one might ask, actually *want* to ascertain the

limits of sociology once and for all? Or, should we perhaps embrace the fact that sociologists constantly build, undo, and re-build the boundaries of their subject matter, because this is what makes sociology a unique discipline after all?

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Notes

1. This is particularly the case with Marxian theory, which has been articulated with all the exemplary social ontologies comprising the first orientation – i.e., those of Weber and Durkheim (Giddens, 1973) as well as critical realism (Collier, 1989; Sayer, 1981). It has, however, also been pointed out that Marxian sociology shares a common ground with some of the perspectives comprising the second orientation (e.g. Law, 1992: 389) – and, one might indeed wonder whether Marx's well-known comments on the 'hand-mill' and 'steam engine', as well as Engels's discussion of the sacredness of the 'dwelling' in Germanic societies are so far away from the emphasis on non-human actors in actor-network theory. But perhaps the most vivid example of how a theoretical approach inspired by this tradition can incorporate, albeit in a highly critical manner, both orientations can be found in a relatively little-noticed essay – simply titled 'Society' – by Adorno. Here, Adorno (1969–1970: 144) maintains that 'society' is 'essentially process' and 'elude[s] verbal definition'; as such, all 'attempts to fix its limits' are bound to be problematic. This might seem like a frontal attack on the first ontological orientation. Yet, Adorno also opposes the attempts to treat 'society' as a vacuous notion, insisting that even if it is not a directly observable entity, we would not be able to make sense of our actual relations without alluding to it; our social lives presuppose the idea of society, while this idea itself is often based on our experience of our concrete interactions. Thus, Adorno argues that the ideas we have about the nature of social reality often involve an element of truth, but these are necessarily partial and historically contingent truths. More generally, this implies that we can neither simply do away with the idea of society as a *sui generis* object, nor assume that the meaning and limits of this object can be fixed once and for all (Adorno, 1969–1970, 1999; Jameson, 1990). Since Adorno wrote at a time before the recent ontological 'turns' in sociology, however, it is almost impossible to predict whether he would sympathize with any of the current attempts that will be discussed in this article.
2. For detailed comparisons in terms of methodology and epistemology, see, for example: Jensen (2012) and Rose (1981).
3. It has often been noted that the relative neglect of Tarde's and Spencer's works in the early sociological literature was partly due to Durkheim's – rather unfair – criticisms. He attacked Tarde for being too 'psychologistic' (Deleuze, 1994: 314) and accused Spencer of 'narrow utilitarianism' (Offer, 2010b: 178–82).
4. Here I exclude from my discussion the sociobiological theories launched in the 1970s (e.g. Barash, 1979; Wilson, 1975), which, as several critics have underlined, tend to go in the direction of some form of biologic reductionism (Gould, 1978; Sahlins, 1976).
5. According to Richardson (2004), a similar idea was also central to Nietzsche's work.
6. Luhmann's work differs considerably from earlier sociological theories that allude to the notion of system. See: Murphy (1982).
7. Luhmann, of course, does not suggest that there is no difference whatsoever between social and other systems. Social systems are neither living, nor conscious systems (Luhmann, 1995: 40, 60–80, 220). But these differences stem from the particularities of a system in

terms of information processing; they do not surpass the common, fundamental quality of self-referentiality.

8. ANT is not alone in relying on metaphors in its formulations. Thus, in addition to the ‘metaphor of heterogeneous networks’, we have the ‘metaphor of strata’ (Collier, 1989: 44), as well as ‘internal conversations’, ‘communicative systems’, ‘memes’, and so on. Nor is this metaphorical language unique to sociology. As Hadot (2006) shows, many fundamental ontological categories in philosophy – e.g. ‘nature’ – are not used in their original, ‘literal’ sense either. One might, then, wonder whether it is possible to propose an ontology – social or otherwise – without having recourse to metaphors. At the very least, it might be worth noting here that, more often than not, the theorists considered in this article proceed with questions such as ‘what is society/culture like?’, ‘what is a social actor like?’, ‘what is it not like?’, and so on.
9. In a similar vein, Foucault (1980: 195) describes the main ‘object’ of his analysis as ‘a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions’. Schatzki’s (2003) ‘site ontology’ also partly resonates with this idea. More generally, the notion of heterogeneous networks are utilized in a range of studies that are not directly associated with ANT. See, for example: Karakayali (2010); Karakayali and Kilic (2013).
10. This implies that ontological theories in sociology often entail political and ethical propositions. See, especially: Woolgar and Lezaun (2013). See, also: Archer (1995, 2003), who explicitly utilizes her social ontology to defend humanist perspectives in sociology, and Latour (2005: 258–62), who argues that ‘symmetrisation’ of human and non-human actors constitutes a necessary step in making sociology a politically relevant discipline in the contemporary world.

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Nedim Karakayali received his *Magister Artium* from University of Oslo, Norway and PhD from University of Toronto, Canada. He has been teaching at Bilkent University, Turkey since 2004. His research interests are in social theory, the self in modern society, and interactions between culture and technology.

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